9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
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town consists of streets of houses of peasant style strung end to end, picturesque with their washes of many colours, but perpetuating and even accentuating the filth which can be tolerated in a village setting of streams and fields but which becomes highly objectionable under urban conditions. On the other hand there are some spaciously-planned country towns which have an air of quiet opulence reminding one of the English heritage to which they owe their foundation. I am aware that in saying this I am ignoring the "inner flame" of the Irish towns, but it cannot be denied that externally they have much to learn from the older civic traditions of the sister isle. Dr. Arensberg has analysed the pattern of the country town and described it as "an extension townwards of the countryman's own social order." He shows that, until recent times, its economy has been that of distribution, not production. Banks and pubs and shops do most of the business and owing to the family system "Ireland is better supplied with shops, at least in number, than any comparable European nation." If we exclude the Lough Neagh basin all the denser areas of population are coastal and most of the country's manufacturing industries are concentrated in the ports (Fig. 108).

To return to the fair, we have tried to show how the periodic gatherings in which they originated were associated with ritual and emotional experiences connected with the celebration of recurring events such as seed-time and harvest. Breaking the routine of toil, it is characteristic that much licence was permitted on these occasions. Until recent times a strong spirit of revelry and a temporary slackening of the moral code distinguished the great Irish fairs. Even to-day the police or civic guards make allowances for fair day and turn a blind eye to many offences against the law: it is recognized as a time of special licence. Games, dancing and faction fights were the order of the day once the buying and selling were over. Until a generation ago cruel "knuckle-dusters" (Fig. 109) were carried in readiness, and the countryman's heavy felt hat was worn as a defence against the blackthorn shillelagh.

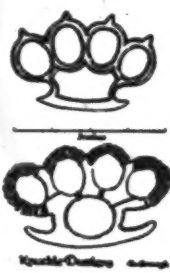

Fig. 109.

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
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blackthorn shillelagh. Trailing the long coat or "trusty" was a recognized invitation for a fight.

To the onlooker it appears as though the business of selling is itself in the nature of a fight, such are the hearty and resounding slappings of open hands up and down the street. Then follows the prolonged argument, the cut and thrust of keen bargainers in a circle of interested onlookers, over the amount of "luck money" to be given back to the seller. It is an age-old ritual far removed from the mechanical sale of a pen of cattle at an auction. The establishment of auction sales and latterly of marketing boards not only undermines the business of the country town, but threatens to destroy the intricate fabric which binds together a thousand homesteads in the intercourse of fair day. It is a sad commentary on rural development that in recent years "dole-days" have brought as many people to town as "fair-days."

Fig. 110. Fair Day.
A bargain is being struck on the left.

9: Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1942
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Wayside cairns in the form of memorial monuments 824
line the roads to the graveyards of Aran. On thorns at cross roads it is the custom in Co. Wexford to hang small crosses, [211]
made of coffin wood, as the funeral procession passes by. [764]

We cannot deal at any length with the superstitious practices which cling so tenaciously to death and burial: 764
they recall the customs of many other regions, such as Brittany, where the old megalithic cult was strong and seems to have lived on in obsessions about death and accompanying notions of re-birth. The anxiety to be buried with relatives reminds us of the strength of the blood-tie, and "bestows even on death a feeling of social interest." It is an Irish belief that the dead live on in the graveyard, and that the last person buried acts as servant to the others, a belief which not long ago led to disputes as to which of two bodies to be buried should be interred first. There are certain old graveyards where women only are said to be buried, and no living woman will enter them. On Innishmurray there are separate [766]
graveyards for men and women. Unbaptised infants were generally interred in special burial grounds, some of which appear to be prehistoric cairns. There is no need to add to the many accounts that have been written of the keening of the dead and of wakes. In connexion with wakes we need only refer to the tricks, pastimes and games which were their accompaniment. The dramatic games were known under such titles as "The Walls of Troy," "Short Castle," "Building the Ship," "Turning the Spit," "Selling the Pig," "Building the Fort," "The Horse Fair," "The Mock Marriage" and "Shuffle the Brogue." While some seem to have been for amusement only, in others it is difficult not to see sex-symbolism and fertility-rites. In recent times the wake-games [786]
have often degenerated into licence and drinking. Maria Edgeworth tells us that "more matches were made at wakes than at weddings."

When going to a funeral it was customary, in parts of the west until the beginning of the present century, to carry some salt in the pocket in order to avert evil influences. Arensberg quotes the belief that "there is never a funeral but the other

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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137 314 farmers, both the flowers of the fields and the shrubs of the forest edge, took on a special significance which they have retained in the peasant mind to the present day. There is powerful magic in the flowers of May, in the hazel twig, the fairy birch, the rowan branch and above all in the flowering hawthorn. This most beautiful of trees first became common in the Neolithic period. In a later chapter we shall consider some of the enduring spiritual aspects of man's association with this environment of his own making. At about this time, too, when the Neolithic economy was both absorbing the older population and being supplemented by metal tools, pollen studies reveal a marked decline of the elm tree which has been explained by the use of its bark and branches as cattle fodder. The oak forests, however, persisted in strength, and were presumably treasured for their supply of pig-fattening mast. Alder also was abundant, occupying soils which were too damp to be cultivated.

The onset of the sub-Atlantic climatic deterioration in the last millennium B.C. seems to have accelerated the peat-forming processes. Both oak and elm decline, but the birch tree spreads widely. In County Antrim, for instance, extensive oak forests growing up to heights of 1,000 feet were overwhelmed in the spreading bogs. The pine had become rare by the end of prehistoric times, though it may have lingered into the historic period on sandy eskers and on the dried surfaces of some of the raised bogs. Despite climatic change and human interference, considerable oak and alder forests survived here and there into the seventeenth century, but these last remnants of the Irish forests were almost all destroyed by the military and economic demands of that troubled century. Among the many consequences was the almost universal exploitation of the peat bogs for fuel. In addition great quantities of turf were consumed by the linen bleachers from the late eighteenth century, and kilns for burning lime and bricks and for drying agricultural produce made considerable demands on the bogs. A minor traditional [372] use which may be mentioned in passing was for the preparation of charcoal for smith's work. The peat was charred in pits.

314 For all its toil turf-cutting provides a welcome break from ● 786 the routine of farmwork, a time when friends and neighbours come together away from the familiar surroundings of fields

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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and houses. There is a marked loosening of inhibitions at this time. The occasion is something of a festival, of picnic meals and keen appetites, so that tea is said to taste better at turf-cutting than at any other time. After the March winds and the lengthening days of spring have dried the bog surface there is a stirring in the homesteads, the well-worn tools are pulled out of their hiding-places and the smith is kept busy repairing spades and barrows. Bright new tools litter the town pavements on fair day, and the countryman chooses his new slane with an exhibition of caution that seems superfluous until one remembers that an ounce of weight or an inch of length can make the difference between smooth ease and back-break. April, everywhere the driest month of the year, is the best month for cutting: an early start gives the turves a better chance of drying, but the planting of crops keeps the men busy till the end of the month, so that May is the likeliest time to see them in the bogs. There is an old belief that to facilitate drying, peat should be cut when the moon is waning (Pl. 9, 1).

A whiff of turf smoke drifting from a hidden fire where the tea is brewed is the first sign that the bog is peopled. If it is a deep bog you will look in vain for signs of activity, but once you have been seen dozens of heads pop up from deep cuttings and the diggers welcome a break for a smoke and a 'crack'. Turbary rights are extremely complicated, but with the decreasing demand for turf there is little dissension even when banks are communally owned. Nowadays each family generally has its own bank or cutting-face, but it is customary for two or three families to pool their labour and work at each bank in turn. The owner of the bank by tradition provides food for the helpers. On the average a week's cutting provides sufficient fuel for each family, but the time taken and the amount required depend on the nature of the bog and on the quality of the turf. Ideally the season's cut should contain a proportion of brown top turf, that is light sphagnum peat for summer firing, and a proportion of black bottom peat for winter use: this is moist humified peat which dries hard as a brick and burns almost like coal. The amount required is measured by the load, that is the load of a small one-horse cart. I was told in Donegal that a good team of four men, cutting, lifting, wheeling and spreading,

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upon hills', which the Dublin government found so obnoxious in the sixteenth century, the persistent efforts of the Irish to maintain their ancient rights and customs of public assembly. In the Anglo-Norman period and again during the plantations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries towns were deliberately established with the intention of bringing 'civilized ways of living to the wild Irish'. Many of them are characterized by a wide street or square—the 'diamond' in Northern Ireland—where fairs and other gatherings could be dominated and controlled from a castle which overlooked it. These urban settlements were known to the Irish, whose native 'towns' were rarely anything more than disorderly clachans, as 'street towns'. They are found scattered at fairly regular intervals all through the countryside, usually at some river crossing or hill gap where routeways meet. Some of them, well-placed in good fertile country, have expanded, while others have decayed or remained mere villages. Often one will find not far away the old Fair Hill from which the fair was attracted as the facilities of the town outweighed the traditional pull of the inconvenient hill-top. But for long the Irish kept to their own fairs which continued, according to an Act of 1431, to 'take great customs and profits to the depression of the boroughs and the trading towns'.[1] The old assembly places are not entirely forgotten, and it often happened that they were visited for games and horse-racing long after they had lost their function as places of commerce. They are celebrated in local ballads and their sites can still be traced by the grassy mounds which are the remains of booths and cattle pens. The lost fairs of Ireland deserve a study such as is being made of the lost villages of England, but the chief sources for such a study, in the absence of records, must lie in field work and the fast-fading memories of the countryside.

The fairs were formerly organized in a recognized sequence of goods and livestock, terminating in sports and horse-racing—and not infrequently in bloodshed. Several of them achieved a notoriety which made their names a byword, and among them none was more notorious, owing partly no doubt to its proximity to Dublin, than Donnybrook Fair. The Parliamentary Gazetteer of 1845 forgets its sober purpose in thus describing

[1] T. W. Freeman, *Ireland*, 95.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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443 543 578 786 it: 'During the week, beginning on the 26th August, is held the notorious Donnybrook Fair, professedly for the sale of horses and black cattle, but really for vulgar dissipation, and formerly for criminal outrage and the most revolting debauchery. It was for generations a perfect prodigy of moral horrors —a concentration of disgrace upon, not Ireland alone, but civilized Europe. It far surpassed all other fairs in the multitude and grossness of its disgusting incidents of vice; and, in general, it exhibited such continuous scenes of riot, bloodshed, debauchery and brutality, as only the coarsest taste and the most hardened heart could witness without painful emotion.' This was by day; 'the orgies of the night may be better imagined than described'. An anonymous writer is quoted as saying: 'We venture to say that there is more misery and madness, devilment and debauchery, than could be found crowded into an equal space of ground in any other part of this our globe, during five times the same space, which is spent at Donnybrook, in one given year'. The *Gazetteer* then recovers itself and offers excuses for 'describing what ought never to have been described'. One regrets rather that the compiler was so overcome by horror as to forget his statistical duties.

543 527 443 [786] The absence of moral restraint which led to extremes of lawlessness at Donnybrook and elsewhere was a normal and characteristic accompaniment of these periodic folk-gatherings. Such moral holidays are a feature of many societies which have not been greatly influenced by urban ways and values. Their purpose appears to be cathartic, but that there is a lingering fertility magic underlying the excitement is suggested by such strange rituals as those which mark the 'Puck Fair and Pattern' of Kilorglin at the head of Dingle Bay in Co. Kerry. The fair is unfortunately not mentioned in the *Parliamentary Gazetteer*, though the village of Kilorglin is described as 'an unprosperous, sequestered, and almost squalid seat of population; and appears to have acquired marvellously little profit from the advantageousness of its position for both inland and seaward trade'. Puck Fair, held every August, is the great event of the year in West Kerry, and lasts three days. 10th August is 'Gathering Day', the 11th is 'Fair Day', and the 12th 'Scattering Day', terms which have no doubt been handed down from days when

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them have had to be suppressed: they became occasions of lawlessness and bloodshed. Like the fairs they drew their adherents from several rival neighbourhoods and therefore brought feuding clans together. The following is a typical comment of the early nineteenth century: 'On these patron days, which

FIG. 83. Turnery. (1) Wooden bowl, Co. Armagh. (2) Butter stamp, Co Fermanagh. (3) Butter stamp, Co. Antrim. (4) Ladle, Co. Antrim.

generally fall out on Sundays, great numbers of young persons of both sexes assemble, tents are erected, music, dancing, drinking and every kind of excess takes place, and the revel not infrequently terminates in battery and bloodshed, from the contention of adverse factions'.[1] Sir William Wilde's description

[1] W. Shaw Mason, *Parochial Survey*, 3, 245 (of Listerling, Co. Kilkenny).

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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796 of the Pattern of Glendalough in Co. Wicklow was written later in the century. The fights would begin early on the eve 578 of the patron's day, on 23rd June; 'the scene was remarkable, an immense crowd had bivouacked among the ruins (of the seven churches of Glendalough) and were cooking their evening meal, gipsy-wise, throughout the space of the sacred enclosure. Dancing, drinking, thimble-rigging, prick-o'-the-loop and other amusements continued even while the bare- [788] headed venerable pilgrims and bare-kneed voteens were going their prescribed rounds. Towards evening the fun became fast and furious . . . the crowd thickened, sticks were brandished and the faction fight began. It was an unsafe locality unless a stipendiary magistrate and about 100 police could keep the combatants, the Byrnes, Tools and Farrells, etc., separate'.[1]

796 Some of the most notorious patterns were connected with holy wells named after a saint but not necessarily located near ● 786 an old church site. Reading the accounts of witnesses in the early nineteenth century it is hard to believe that religious devotion could be associated with such profanity, but granting that social conditions in the decades before the great famine must have contributed to scenes which the church itself described as 'drunkenness and debauchery', there was, as with the wakes for the dead, a vestige of innocent paganism in the rituals. Some patterns survived their banning by the church and have persisted, stripped of their grosser elements, to this day. The [788] celebrated wells of St. Patrick at Struell in Co. Down, which are still visited by a few pilgrims on St. John's Eve, were the scene of the gathering of great crowds of people and of strange rites until a few years ago. Here as often happened the chief celebration was on the Eve of the Feast of St. John the Baptist and not on the patron saint's day, so that it was not strictly a pattern. Another Midsummer gathering which has often been described is that of St. Ronogue's Well near Cork, which has changed beyond recognition since Mrs. Hall, in 1824, described it as an assembly of 'the worthless and dissipated of the whole county. To the superstitious rites of the morning succeeded the saturnalia of the evening;—the having drunk of the water being considered as a licence for every sort of debauchery . . .

[1]Sir William Wilde, *J.R.S.A.I.* (1873), 449.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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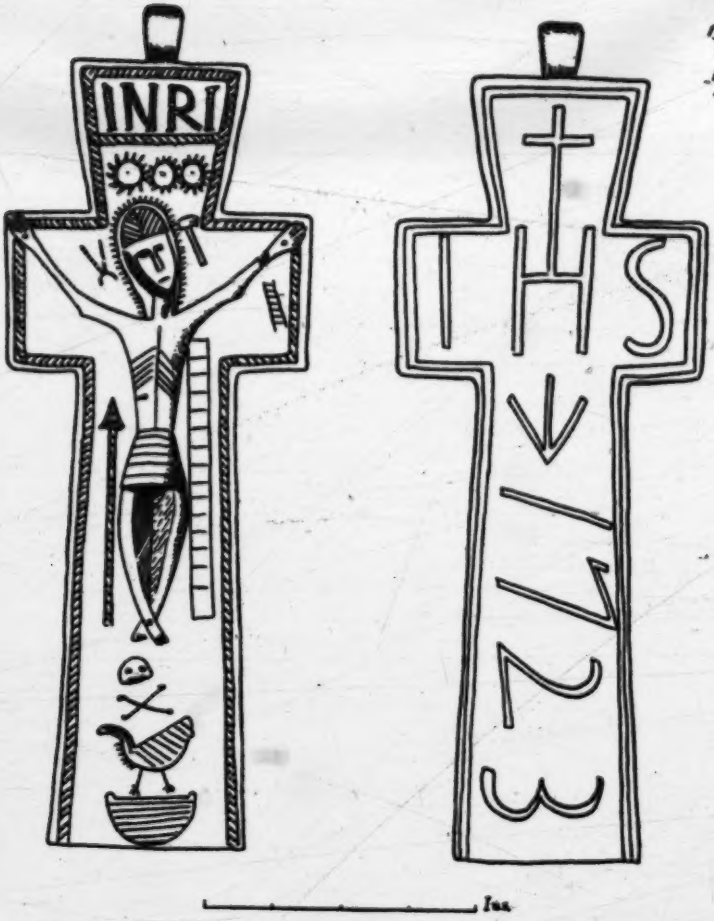

FIG. 84. Portable crucifix ('penal cross'). Found at Hilltown, Co. Down.

dancing, shouting, fiddling, courting, drinking and fighting'.[1] 796
In some celebrated instances the holy wells are associated [786]
with lakes and islands, for example Gouganebarra at the source 788
of the River Lee, and the most famous of all Irish pilgrimages 778

[1]Mr. and Mrs. S. C. Hall, *Ireland: Its Scenery, Character Etc.*, 1, 281.

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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527 bones, were formerly considered proper to the occasion. There
[372] were dances round the fires, performed with great dexterity and precision by youths armed with cudgels. The May-pole,
[177] however, and the May-bush observances seem to go with areas
[824] of strong English influence and do not seem to have been generally adopted by the Irish, perhaps because May-trees, which are not given this name in Ireland, are likely to be fairy thorns and therefore should not be damaged. The May Eve assemblies are thus described in eighteenth century Kilkenny: 'Bloody battles and much confusion and uproar is the mischief that follows from the barbarous and unheeded custom of collecting *May-balls* among the new-married folks . . . The hedges and fences, in the outlets of our city, are stripped of full-grown hawthorns, whose late blooming pride and fragrancy is now miserably dying away on dunghills before cabin doors, by way of *May-bushes*, no longer, alas! to afford a nuptial bed to the new-married linnet and his mate, but fastened in the ground for the vilest purpose—to hang filthy clouts upon'.[1] The gold and white balls which were hung on maypoles have been regarded as symbols of sun and moon—or it may be of butter and milk. Another May Day custom was the licence allowed
[786] young boys to run about stinging people with nettles, a privilege which in my youth in Shropshire was permitted only on 29th May, the victims being those who did not wear an oak-apple.

527 If the May Day fires are now more in evidence in the back streets of Belfast than on the high hills, the Midsummer fires still burn
372 strongly in some country districts and their pagan flames have not been so easily quenched. I saw dozens of them in Co. Galway on Midsummer Eve in 1956, mostly at country cross-roads. Old men in Donegal have told me that they remembered the time when they had counted from their hilltop fire nearly a hundred others. Young men would show their mettle by jumping to and fro through the flames, and girls by doing so hoped to marry early and have many children. We recall that
[789] leaping is in folk tradition a widely approved method of making the crops grow high, and the fires, it is conjectured, were meant to encourage the sun, now at its turning point, to shine on through the harvest. Midsummer was a time when evil influ-

[1] *Finn's Leinster Journal* (4th May, 1768).

13:Evans K-5 (ca. 1940) 1957
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763 observe the correct procedure in laying out the corpse, generally on a table or a door. A plate containing tobacco or salt was placed on the corpse and sometimes a turf, which was believed to prevent decomposition, a transference from the observed preservative qualities of the bogs.

764 Although a great deal of information on the wakes which followed has been collected, it is difficult to obtain precise ●786 details about the wake games because of their apparent obscenity. Some of them survive as innocent games in districts where wakes have not been entirely suppressed, but it should be stressed that the full ritual of the traditional wake games was carried out in innocence: 'the peasantry who practised them had no idea of outraging propriety or religion in their performance, holding an unquestioning faith that such observances were right and proper at wakes, whilst under any other circumstances they would shrink with horror from such indelicate exhibitions'.[1] Moreover, they were generally 'reserved for the deaths of old people who had survived the ordinary span of life, or young children who could not be looked upon as an irreparable loss.'[2]

Apart from a great variety of informal amusements which were traditional at wake gatherings—riddles, jokes, singing, dancing, horse-play, tricks, feats of strength or agility, wrestling and so on—a list of 130 specific wake games has been collected by Seán Ó Súilleabháin, and it is 'of necessity incomplete.'[3] Some of them were dramatic performances of considerable complexity; and one recalls the Irishman's traditional skill in dramatization. In Kilkenny the principal game was the *frannsa*, a mock ceremony during which several young folk were 'married' by a mock priest, usually a weaver or a tailor, who was dressed in straw and wore a huge straw rope as a stole. 'After each couple was married, he put them to bed in a corner of the room, sprinkled them with water and gave them plain advice about their future conduct as man and wife.'[4] We need not be surprised that, after this initiation, in the words of

[1] J. G. A. Prim, *J.R.S.A.I.* (1858), 334.
[2] J. G. A. Prim, loc. cit.
[3] S. Ó Súilleabháin, *A Handbook of Irish Folklore*, 602.
[4] J. O'Donovan, *J.R.S.A.I.* (1858), 31.

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WEDDINGS AND WAKES

Maria Edgeworth, 'more matches were made at wakes than at weddings.' The most frank account of the nature of the games I have come across reads as follows: 'They were placed under the conduct of some peasant of the district who excelled in rustic wit and humour, who went under the title of "Borekeen", and whose orders were carried into force by subordinate officers, all arrayed in fantastic habiliments. The "game" usually first performed was termed "Bout", and was joined in by men and women, who all acted a very obscene part which cannot be described. The next scene generally was termed "Making the Ship', with its several parts of "laying the keel", forming the "stem and stern", and erecting "the mast", the latter of which was done by a female using a gesture and expression, proving beyond doubt that it was a relic of Pagan rites. The "Bull and the Cow" was another game strongly indicative of a Pagan origin, from circumstances too indelicate to be particularized. The game called "Hold the Light", in which a man is blindfolded and flogged, has been looked upon as a profane travestie of the passion of our Lord; and religion might also be considered as brought into contempt by another of the series, in which a person caricaturing a priest, and wearing a rosary, composed of small potatoes strung together, enters into conflict with the "Borekeen", and is put down and expelled from the room by direction of the latter . . . "Turning the Spit" and "Selling the Pig" are the names of two others of those games; in that called "Drawing the Ship out of the Mud" the men engaged actually presented themselves before the rest of the assembly, females as well as males, in a state of nudity, whilst in another game the female performers attired themselves in men's clothes and conducted themselves in a very strange manner.'[1] From other sources we learn that boys and girls, in some games, wore hides and appeared representing bulls and cows.

Parallels to these practices can be adduced from the so-called simple societies in many parts of the world, and as in Ireland Christian missionaries found it very difficult to suppress the rituals enacted between death and burial. The keening of the corpse likewise carries us through time to the earliest emotions of human societies faced with the mystery of death. The liberal

[1] J. G. A. Prim, loc. cit.